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A review of an oration
delivered before the young men
of Boston, on the 17th of June
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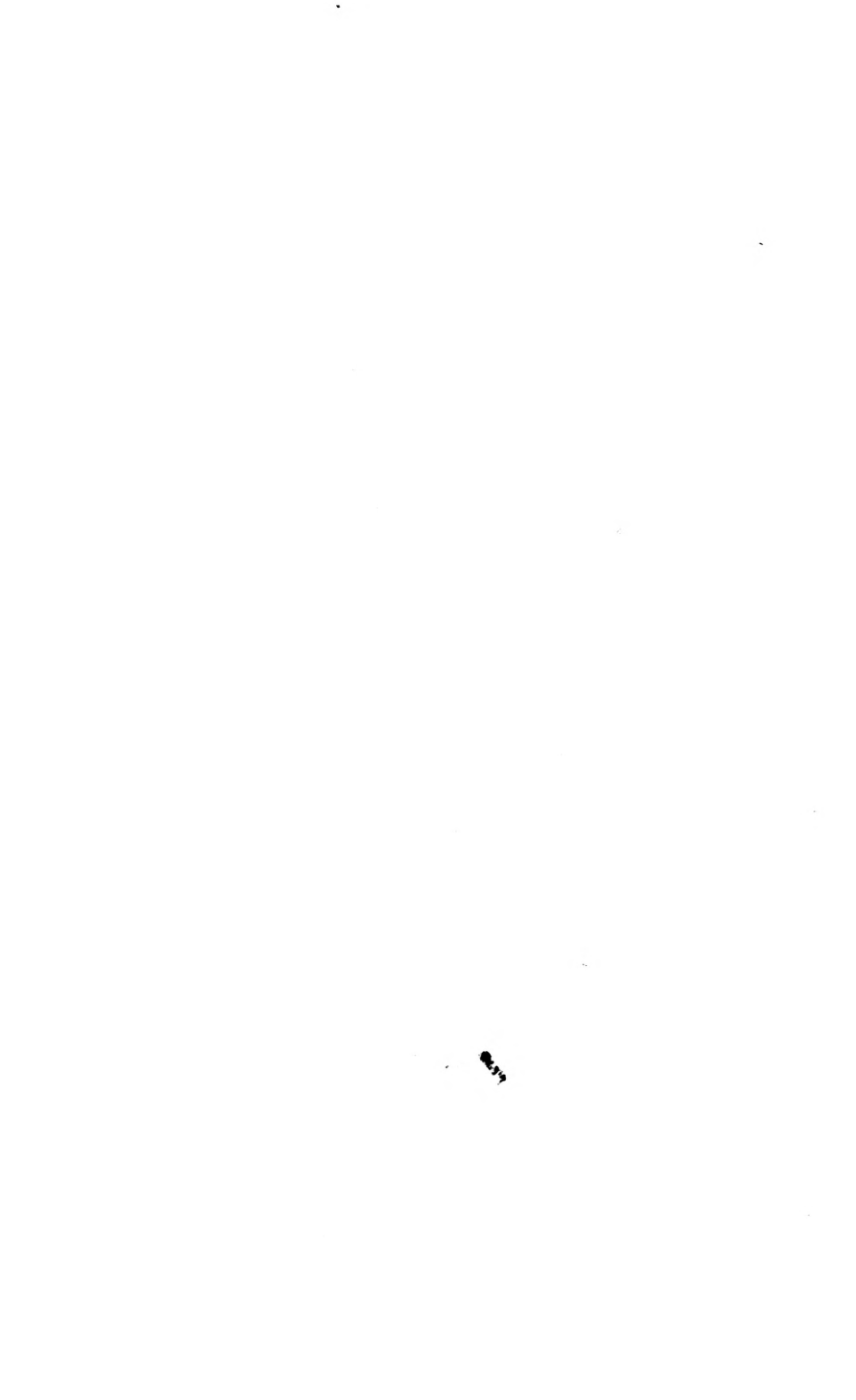


Class _____

Book _____ P 74 _____

REVIEW
OF
MR. OTIS'S
ORATION.

1831



A

REVIEW

OF

“AN ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

YOUNG MEN OF BOSTON,

ON THE

FOURTH OF JULY,

M DCCC XXXI.”

1880
1881
1882

REVIEW.

AN Oration, delivered before the young men of Boston, followed by a dinner of no inconsiderable notoriety, and published in Carter, Hendee & Babcock's best style, will, no doubt, find a large number of readers. When it is remembered, indeed, that Boston claims to be, not only, "the cradle of liberty," but also, the "literary emporium," one can hardly help feeling a certain degree of curiosity, as well concerning the manner and the style, as about the matter and the substance of a performance, which, doubtless, was specially intended to suit the taste, and tickle the fancy, of those to whom it was addressed.

A judicious orator pitches his pipes in such exact harmony with the souls of his hearers, that, as a musician can at once supply the bass of a tune, though the air only be played, so an experienced reader, from the tone of a speech, can, in general, make out, pretty well, the prevailing taste and favorite principles of the audience. In common cases, and where we are satisfied that nature has gifted the orator with the ordinary quantity of sense and tact, this method of judging an audience, may be safely

enough relied upon. But all recollect the fable of the ass, who undertook to imitate the little dog, and to fawn upon his master ; and, in like manner, that sort of asses, who deliver orations, will, now and then, in the hope of delighting, run into very ridiculous excesses.

I fear that, in the instance of the oration before the young men of Boston, there must have been some such mistake ; for God forbid, that the taste or understandings of the young men themselves, should be measured by any such standard. Any one, who shall judge the young men of Boston, by the printed speech, put forth by their orator, will do them grievous injustice. It is in their behalf, it is to vindicate them, that I have taken pen in hand. The oration itself is too silly and absurd, to merit any thing more than silent contempt ; to the folly of speaking such a speech, were no one but himself concerned, the orator might have added, with impunity, the folly of printing it ;—who would take the trouble to gainsay him ? But, in the present case, the young men of Boston are implicated. Unless some public protest be made against it, the community will, naturally enough, regard them as the god-fathers of this offspring of imbecility ; their reputation for common sense is at a stake ; their character demands the sacrifice ; and the ink of criticism must flow.

It is, indeed, with the greatest reluctance, that I undertake the task of criticising a performance, which bears, upon its face, such marks of utter folly ; which is, in fact, so destitute of arrangement, connexion, argument, or meaning,—is such a soft and shapeless mass, that one hardly knows how or where,

to take hold of it. The orator complains of the English political writers,—that, “they stop at a fixed line, and all beyond is chaos and absurdity.” I wish I could pay him even so limited a compliment. I wish he stopped at a fixed line; and that I was not obliged to drop the word “beyond;” and, with respect to his performance, to say, that “all is chaos and absurdity.” If it had any salient points of common sense, it would make my task a good deal easier; as ~~it~~ is, I must do the best I can.

If, in the course of my remarks, I should seem to the orator, to indulge in any undue severity, I beseech him to remember, that in the realm of criticism, all old-fashioned and antiquated notions of rank and distinction have long since been done away. “We, the critics,” have long since attained to that perfection of liberty, which he so idolizes; we acknowledge no “privileged classes;” we bow to no superior; in his own elegant and forceable language, “we are our own governors; we are the Lord’s anointed; we are the powers that be, and *we bear not the sword in vain.*” A demagogue may, or may not, be successful; a speech may, or may not, be clapped; but printed nonsense will inevitably be exposed to merited ridicule.

I will begin with a few remarks on the general tone of the oration. Its whole spirit is so bitter, sour and crabbed, it overflows with such malignant contempt of every body and every thing;—the orator delights so much in abusing all the past and all the present; dwells with such evident pleasure on “national absurdities, political nuisances, and public abominations;” and speaks with such gusto of “the

fatal virus of political corruption," that, whatever other blunders he may have made, he certainly shows a good deal of skill, in concluding his oration with the words, "unutterable ruin ;"—which two words may indeed be looked upon, as a recapitulation of the whole speech, as a sort of index, echo, and chorus, to the whole six and thirty pages.

According to this learned Theban, "our own system, unparalleled as it is, is as yet an imperfect system ;"—liberty even here, in America, "lies idle," and her cause "is by no means sure ;"—our independence "languishes with a sickly and scarcely perceptible existence ;"—even here, the people "are deceived," and "circumvented ;"—even here, they are "capricious," punishing their innocent friends, and forgetting the long tried affection of their faithful servants* ;"—we even "have our full share of national absurdities, political nuisances, and public abominations" ;—we even, "are yet in comparative infancy," and the spirit of liberty is so cold, and "public sentiment is so timid,"—men in general are so much ashamed of liberty start naked,—"that we hardly need expect to be stripped of our swaddling clothes, until we have strength to tear them from our limbs," (or as, perhaps, might properly enough have been added,—till some political wet nurse, in the shape of a fourth-of-July orator, stuffs our mouths with pap, and in the mean time, does the good office for us.)

So much for ourselves ; but as for the rest of the world,—fools,—slaves,—idiots,—the language has

* Qu. The excellent Mayor of Boston ?

not names bad enough, or terms strong enough to stigmatize the depth of their folly and wretchedness. But let the orator speak for himself.

“If we yet hesitate, let us look at Europe, and behold how she has drifted down the tide of eighteen centuries; ever changing, alternately receding or advancing, as she falls into the varying currents; now threatened with instant destruction, and escaping perhaps by sheer awkwardness; now on the very eve of refuge and prosperity, but plunging into the only strait encompassed with real danger; now pausing in the jaws of ruin, to meditate upon some idle fancy; now abandoning the path of her salvation, to gratify a vain revenge. *It is revolting, it is sickening to behold her.* Her lofty frame, her noble mind, her admirable accomplishments, serve but to deepen her degradation, and we mourn more bitterly the hopelessness of her reform.

* * * She has missed all her glorious opportunities; she has suffered unnumbered changes, utter and entire revolutions; has been overrun by almost all the nations of the earth; has wiped from her surface the vestiges of successive empires, and yet now *presents an aspect, hideous with the leprosy of her Tiberian age, (?) and reeks under the very symptoms, (qu. what symptoms?) which provoked the mockery of the Goths.*”

pp. 14, 15.

It was the judicious advice of an old preacher to a young preacher, “never to raise the devil for the sake of laying him again.” This excellent precept seems never to have reached the ears of the young men’s orator; for he goes ranging like a madman, through all ages and nations, conjuring up the direst phantoms, in the shape of Romans, Goths, popes, priests, feudal chieftains, astrologers, alchymists, venetian merchants, moors, mahometans, huns, normans, cathedrals, fiefs, castles, benefices, kings, nobles, Lord Byron, the author of Paul Clifford,* principalities, dukedoms, counties, rotten boroughs,

* Did, the young men’s orator ever read Paul Clifford? Regent street is not mentioned in it, and so far from being a defence of the nobility, it is a satire upon them, and a very bitter one too.

and Heaven knows what besides, and is at great pains and expense to transport them all the way across the Atlantic, for no other earthly reason, so far as appears, except to show his skill at exorcising and abuse. The European nobility, for instance, are belabored through three pages in terms like the following,—

“ Nothing has ever blackened the human heart, and seared the conscience more irretrievably than the manners of European high-life. Their errors, (qu. whose errors ?) follies and violences have signalized other ages ; this, they, (qu. who ?) have blighted with the mildew of cold, contemptuous selfishness. Their wealth and privileges must be supported, if the laws are warped. Their luxury must be pampered if the country mourns ; they succeed if by subtlety ; they triumph if by treachery ; adroit in policy, cunning in ambition, they maintain their own preeminence, and sooner than relinquish the extortions of their birth-right, (?), they would sprinkle their palace floors with the blood of the provinces, and wash them with the tears of their own poor.”

In truth, if we are to give credit to the screechowl notes of this evil omened orator, the whole world is in a most pitiable condition. Here in America, to be sure, there are a chosen few, who have got the true idea of liberty, which if duly carried into action, with a total disregard and contempt of every principle of political wisdom, hitherto acknowledged to be well founded, will at length place us, “ on the height to which we aspire,” and “ raise our whole population to an undreamt elevation of dignity and happiness.” But, as to the rest of the world, there is no hope for it. All the nations of Europe, are now, and ever have been, and ever will be, in a political state, wretched beyond all description. The maddest fanatic never so limited the number of the elect, as our orator does, the number of the free ; the most

furious polemic never assumed a tone more lordly and dogmatical, than that, in which the young men's orator indulges, from the beginning, to the end, of his oration.

After this long tirade against all people, nations, tongues, and kindred, the ingenious gentleman very coolly assures us, that it is to the predominance of *English* notions, that we may trace "much of the asperity which vitiates our political differences, and which is alike the enemy to candor and truth." I do not think we shall need the foreign importation much longer; for I am very certain, we have in this young men's oration, a specimen of "asperity" of undoubted domestic manufacture, which may safely be warranted, equal to any imported.

Such is a fair account of the orator's tone and manner, and a comprehensive summary of his doctrines and principles;—so far, that is, as he seems to have any. For in truth the reader is not a little puzzled in diverse places of the oration, to guess what the orator would be at. The greater part of his speech is made up of high sounding words, strung together, pretty much, at hap hazzard. One would imagine that he had turned over the leaves of a young ladies common-place book, culled out a great parcel of choice phrases, such as "stately halls," "armorials and trophies," "sportive dances," "ponderous foundations," "stupendous columns," "anti-quated scaffoldings," "golden coronets," "grotesque and fitful drapery," "sparkling towers," "embroidered banners," "groves and gardens," et cetera, et cetera, and had sprinkled them up and down his discourse, without troubling himself much about the why

or the wherefore. He seems also to have a particular fondness for mixed metaphors. Take for instance the following sentence :

“We should be slow to attribute the imperfections, which deform our system, to the system itself. There is no fault in the design ; no defect in the construction ; the site is well chosen ; the materials at hand, and all that is requisite to insure to our country *a continual career of prosperity*, an unfading vigor, *an ever renovating youth*, is a determination *to eradicate the obstructions in the road*, to tear down the antiquated scaffoldings, to abandon the miserable tools and cumbersome machinery, with which it has been surrounded, and with the strong arm of the people to go to work.”
p. 7.

What activity of imagination, what vigour of fancy ! This one short paragraph is worth a whole book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. “Our system,” is first, an unfinished building, then a race horse, then a youth of unfading vigour, next, a go-cart, with its road obstructed, and then an unfinished building again.

I am inclined to think, that tyrannical old aristocrat Lindley Murray, would shake his head at the sentence which follows :

“When we reflect, that the essential, the peculiar principle of this happy country, the principle that all power resides in the people, emanates from the people, and is responsible to the people ; that this principle when at the very acme of its triumph, at the full tide of its glory, after its long, its prosperous, its unparalleled career, should be confronted, doubted and denied even here, where we have ocular proof and continual demonstration of its benefit and efficacy, it needs no augury to pronounce an hour even of this day, inauspicious for mere exultation.”
p. 6.

The desire to make what is vulgarly called, *a dash*, has introduced a strange confusion of ideas into the following paragraph. It really contains some very surprising information :

“ If we seek examples for our country and for ourselves, let us resort to the new created West. There the fountains are uncorrupted. There civilisation meets nature unimpaired. There we can behold how the young armed (?) American grapples with the wilderness, and thence we can return, and imagine how our fathers lived. Europe presents much to our view, but America still more. There, (that is to say, in America) liberty, like the buried giant struggles beneath the trembling mountains; there, from aroused nations, swells a new murmur like the “ sad genius of the coming storm.” There Scythia frowns again upon the devoted South, and the shade of Kosciusko walks with the noon-day pestilence amid their (qu. whose) affrighted hosts.” pp. 33.

Here follows a choice specimen of the true subline. The whole “ Art of sinking,” contains nothing equal to it.

“ Do we suppose that we can shed our liberty upon other countries without exertion ; and let it fall upon them like the dew which stirs not the leaf ? No. Liberty must be long held suspended over them in the atmosphere by our unseen and unwearied power. The more intense the heat which oppresses them, the more must it (qu. which, liberty or the heat ?) saturate and surcharge the air ; till at last, when the ground is parched dry, when vegetation is crisped up, *and the gasping people are ready to plunge into destruction for relief*—(i. e. are ready to jump out of the frying pan into the fire,) then will it, (qu. what ?) call forth its hosts, from every quarter of the horizon ; then will the sky be overcast, the landscape darkened, and Liberty, at one peal, with one flash, will pour down her million streams ; then will she lift up the voice which echoed in days of yore, from the peaks of Otter to the Grand Monadnock ; then will

“ ‘ Jura answer through her misty cloud,
Back to the joyous Alps, who call to her aloud.’ ”

There now !—if that is not fine,—it can’t be for want of thunder and lightning.

Our orator, like others of his stamp, delights mostly in generalities, and so long as he avoids descending to particulars, he froths and fumes away, with all the spirit of a bottle of ginger beer ;—I do not like to shock his republicanism, by a more aristocratic

comparison, or I might possibly have said a bottle of champaign. But unluckily for himself, in a certain part of his discourse, whether by way of illustration or ornament hardly appears, but for some reason or other, or what perhaps is just as likely, for no reason at all, he deems it necessary to enter into a brief sketch of the history of the world for the last eighteen centuries. These historical reminiscences are pretty much in the style of a book well known in all young ladies' schools, called "Whelpley's Compend," but from beginning to end, they abound in errors, the most absurd, such as any young lady of thirteen, ought to be heartily ashamed of. This historical sketch has the following preface :

"To what eminence would she (Europe) not have attained, had her youth looked forward to futurity, unblinded by a superstitious veneration for established institutions : had they (qu. who ?) disregarded the watchwords "church and king," rejected the collars of nobility, spurned their (qu. whose ?) golden coronets, and jewelled stars, and aimed boldly at the good of the people, and the amelioration of the world ?"

After a little more preliminary flourish, the orator goes on to trace the history of Europe, from the christian era ;—for at that period he seems to think the history of Europe begins, never having heard, I suppose of the Roman republic, or the Grecian commonwealths. But seriously, I should like to be informed, if it can be possible that this young men's orator, has yet to learn, that the change from republican freedom to imperial servitude took place at Rome, not out of a "superstitious veneration for established institutions," but by the arts of Julius Cæsar, who began by being a demagogue, and so overturning the old institutions, and ended by

being a tyrant, and building up an empire on the ruins of the republic? Can this young men's orator possibly be so ignorant as not to know, that the Romans for a long time after the establishment of the empire, held to the perfect equality of all Roman citizens, "rejected the collars of nobility," "spurned golden coronets and jewelled stars," and held the name of king in abhorrence, bitter as that even, of the young men's orator? And does he not know, that the idea of a privileged order of nobles, the inequalities of rank and "trappings of nobility," were introduced into the empire, not out of any "veneration for antiquity," but by the innovating, *reforming*, *radical*, measures of Diocletian and Constantine, in utter contempt and total disregard, of all ancient laws and prejudices? Is this young men's orator, so ridiculously ignorant as not to know, that the "watch-words," as he calls them, of "church and king," were first heard within the last two hundred years, and were never heard at all, at least as a party signal, out of the limits of Great Britain and Ireland? Does he not know, that this English tory signal, would be as unintelligible to an old Roman, could we call one from the grave, to a chieftain of the middle ages, or to a Russian or Polish nobleman of our own times,—as unintelligible even, as this young men's oration itself?

But let us have a specimen of the historical sketch. Thus it begins :

"For three centuries after the birth of our saviour, Rome, the mistress of Europe, exhibited at once, the most ignominious depravity, the most brilliant literary excellence, (qu. how many writers of the third century, does the ingenious orator know, even by name?)—and the highest political grandeur.

Nation after nation was successively reduced to her sway, and captive kings followed the triumphant chariots of her generals, through crowds of adoring people, and poured out the riches of their distant dominions into her insatiable treasury." p. 15.

Now Niebuhr is nothing to this. The discoveries he has made or pretends to have made, in Roman history, are like dust in the balance compared with this splendid discovery of the young men's orator. It always had been supposed hitherto, that all the brilliant Roman conquests were achieved before the commencement of the christian era. There is a fellow, one Edward Gibbon, no doubt totally beneath the notice of the young men's orator, who undertakes to say upon the authority of a parcel of old, antiquated Latin and Greek historians, that beside the province of Britain, and Trajan's transient conquests in Dacia, the emperors added nothing to the extent of the empire. But no doubt this is all a mistake ; and I suppose the young men's orator has some learned work in the press, in which he intends to confute all previous writers on this interesting subject, and to introduce a radical reform into history.

If I am right in conjecturing that he has already begun to print, he had better add to his treatise a short appendix on modern chronology, for the sentence below, contains some splendid discoveries in that branch of learning.

"At length after a barren interval, the age of Bacon, Descartes and Galileo commenced ; and human reason after having been immersed in syllogisms four hundred years, began to walk abroad. (qu. whereabouts were the orator's wits walking while he was writing this sentence?) Charles the Fifth now concentrated in himself the martial glory of Europe. Henry the Eighth, in the qualms of his tender conscience, established a church in England after his own heart, and with himself at its head, in lieu of the pope ; Elizabeth soon followed," &c. pp. 20 21.

Shades of Usher, Newton and Petavius, hide your diminished heads in silence ! Here is a chronologist, who outdoes you all ! The world had hitherto supposed, that Henry the Eighth, was quietly laid in his grave, before either Bacon, Galileo, or Descartes, had seen the light, and that, of the three, Bacon only had yet appeared upon the stage, and he, but as an infant three years old, when Charles the Fifth expired in the retirement of the cloister. But here comes an orator, and, with one stroke of his pen, reforms all that,—and let no worshipper of antiquity dare to raise his voice in opposition to the decree ; for in the orator's own words—

—“The young American is not to be deterred from wholesome innovation by the cry of Radicalism and Reform. No lurking treason insinuates itself into his heart. Guilt seizes not upon his imagination. He may promote any succession, unravel any usage, attack any principle of the constitution, [and, I suppose, tumble all history and chronology into a heap] and, provided he can ameliorate, he finds a generous people ready to follow.”

But I am tired of pointing out errors and exposing absurdities. There is no pleasure in breaking a lance against a post of wood, or in thrusting blows at a man of straw. I will therefore leave the orator's “political abominations,” learned in the school of Fanny Wright, or studied at the feet of I know not what hoary demagogue, to be “frowned down” by the good sense of the community. The young men of Boston have too much mother wit, to be cajoled by stuff so very wretched. If Fanny Wright herself had put forth an oration, what she would have said, would doubtless have exhibited a combination of artful sophistry and sprightly wit, such as would

have demanded a well-considered answer. But this unfledged disciple of hers, this new-hatched duckling of radical reform, must paddle long in the mud and water before he will attain size enough to attract the aim of the marksman. On the present occasion, I have considered him not at all as a politician, but only as a public speaker. Since, however, I have touched upon politics I cannot refrain from a parting word of advice: Let the young men's orator reform his grammar, reform his rhetorick, reform his knowledge of history, reform his style, reform his taste, reform his imagination, reform his understanding, and it will then be full time for him to undertake to reform the state.

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